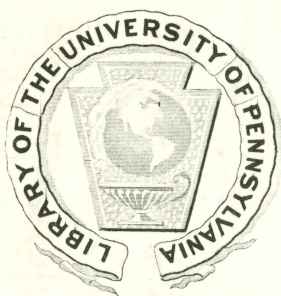


Democracy and Idealism
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Dr. Smith

DEMOCRACY and IDEALISM

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I

This subject of democracy and idealism would interest us even if there were no war. But it is the war which has forced us to take stock of our democracy—to see how much of it we have on hand, and how we intend to dispose of it. As citizens we have moments of impatience, when the enemy challenges us to state our objects in the war, and our government does not reply with a facile catalogue. We should like the government, of course, to state precisely what we aim at, and by the statement to overwhelm the enemy with conscience-stricken confusion. But as teachers we ought to know how hard it is to define an ideal. When we are asked, as we sometimes are even in times of peace, just what we are trying to do in education, our gratitude flows toward any man or woman who can answer the question for us.

Most of us do not know our own ideals. What is worse, most of us do not understand what an ideal is. The ways of thought which pass for wisdom in education, in politics, in society today, make little use of the concept or of the word "ideal"; they are far from the humane philosophy which defined that concept and gave us that word; they point somewhat exclusively to nature and to various things called natural—instincts, impulses, emotions; they neglect what alone makes man humane—his intelligent purposes and his intelligent will to pursue them. In current speech the ideal is either the undesirable opposite of the real, or else it is a better world, vainly dreamt of in present conditions. But an ideal, properly understood, is both the child and the father of the real; it is both desirable and practicable; it is the solution of a present need which imagination proposes—imagination, at once directed and subdued by experience, at once restrained and fortified by the will.

Ideals, so defined, are the common steps by which the reason marches. The maid setting the table imagines first a table set, and then imitates the ideal. The tailor imagines a garment made, and then copies it. The merchant contemplates his business as it should be six months hence, and then makes his actual affairs conform to that foresight. In each case the ideal is directed and subdued by experience; the table is set with reference to the needs of the diners and with reference to

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the supply of food, the garment depends upon the material and upon the needs of the wearer, and the business will be controlled by the amount of the merchant's capital and by the state of trade. In this sense, then, to have ideals means to have a clear vision of our immediate purposes. In this sense my subject, "Democracy and Idealism," is roughly equivalent to "Democracy and what it wants."

It is not quite enough, however, to know what we want. An ideal is not genuine, even though it be practicable, until our will is enlisted to achieve it. Unless our purposes are fortified by our will to accomplish them, by our will to master the necessary means for their accomplishment, it is obvious that our ideals will not take living form, nor replace in experience the reality which begot them. It is also obvious that unless our ideals are restrained by the will, by a resolve to accomplish them in the known conditions of life, there is no phantasy so wild that it might not be called an ideal. The second half of our definition is important. I venture to repeat: an ideal is the solution which imagination proposes for a present need—imagination, at once directed and subdued by experience, at once restrained and fortified by the will.

With this definition we ask ourselves what our ideals are. For the purposes of the moment, we restate our subject as a double theme—"What democracy wants, and how resolutely it wants it."

II

If an ideal is a solution to a present need, it is not surprising that nations and individuals should find it hard at short notice to name their ideals. It takes time and reflection to discover what our needs are, or to state them rationally; for to any situation we are likely to react with our whole nature, with emotions much more than with reason. Man, as we are often reminded, is rational only at times, and then usually under compulsion. If the war is one of those crises which force men to think, we must not expect the thinking to be immediately fruitful or satisfying. Not only is it difficult at all times to know ourselves, but there is danger in an hour so emotional of becoming entangled in words—of believing that our ideals are liberty and democracy, without stopping to reflect that the enemy may also be fighting for those words in a quite different sense. There is danger that our ideals, though more than catchwords, may not be completely genuine; they may be pleasant to contemplate, so long as we need not put them

into effect. There is danger also of overlooking a fact peculiar to the United States, that our ideals have been recruited by immigration, and that the ideals of many of our citizens are solutions of needs discovered in the old world, but not perhaps existing here.

At every point in our history, therefore, such an inventory as we are now compelled by the war to make, would have discovered that our ideals were not genuine—not quite what we thought they were. Some of the forefathers came here, we say, for liberty and conscience—an ideal which they had imagined after experience of persecution in Europe. But there is little reason to think that the ideal of religious liberty was at first genuine. In his ironic tale, "Endicott and the Red Cross," Hawthorne portrays the pillory and the stocks which the Puritan liberty-lovers set up at once for those whose doctrine did not agree with theirs. If religious liberty is the one ideal which we have most nearly achieved in this country, our will to achieve it has been developed in response to needs discovered here, not remembered from overseas; we have learned here that religious toleration is necessary to the well-being of the modern state. A second group of our forefathers came here, we say, for political liberty, for equal political opportunity. Not only have we failed to achieve this liberty, but we do not desire to achieve it; it is not a genuine ideal. We wish to retain for ourselves some political opportunities which we withhold from negroes and Orientals. We defend ourselves at times by saying that in this problem economic rather than political equality is involved. Equal economic opportunity, however, is thought by some people to be one of our ideals. They are probably wrong who think so. Emerson was convinced that we deceived ourselves when we talked of economic liberty and maintained a tariff. If these are not genuine ideals, we sometimes hope that at least we have a genuine desire to provide equal opportunities in education. This ideal might indeed be genuine if we understood what it means, but we have misplaced the word "equal," and the theorists of today offer so-called systems which hope to secure, not equal opportunities in education, but identical results. Madame Montessori will see to it that the children of the rich have the same tactile sensitiveness as the children of the streets, and Dr. Flexner will make sure that our ignorance of the best that has been said and thought in the world is distributed evenly.

But underlying all our present and past ideals, whether

genuine or not, lies the assumption that America is an Eldorado—a place where life will yield wealth and happiness without corresponding effort on our part—a place where ideals are realized with slight exertion of the will. This flattering hope was the motive of those hazardous voyages that Hakluyt collected for our delight; it reappears in so recent a book as “An American in the Making,” Mr. Ravage’s illuminating account of the motives which bring immigrants to this country. His fellow villagers left Roumania and came to New York, he tells us, because a boy who had previously emigrated made a return visit to his native home dressed in a long coat and a silk hat, and the popular imagination soon defined New York as a place where all the villagers had a chance, not of enjoying social and political equality, but of becoming Mayor. So long as the notion of Eldorado persists of our country as a place of special privilege, how can the ideal of economic liberty be genuine? What we are after is not equality of fortune, but success for ourselves above our fellows, or else wealth acquired without effort.

The thought of America as an Eldorado can be made to illustrate still further the transition in which ideals are. What would it mean to us if we developed this subconscious sense of an Eldorado into a frank ideal? With its natural resources, with its climate and location, our country can be made a land of magic; but it must be made—it will not become so without our effort. The Eldorado which the immigrant thinks of is a wild, irresponsible dream, the product of his former poverty and discouragement, but not a complete ideal, since it is not restrained and fortified by the will. Were we determined to bring this dream to pass, were we willing to learn the science and the self-control which must precede this achievement, the old fables of a fortunate land would come true. But to live by habit in the presence of an obvious yet neglected opportunity, may perhaps be the most disastrous experience for morals and ideals; perhaps we have become used to shirking the responsibility which should follow a clear sight of needs and purposes.

III

What are our ideals now, in the midst of the war? We should not be troubled if it appears that they are quite new—ideals such as our forefathers never dreamt of; the needs that beset us today are also quite new. The danger is not that we should be found inconsistent, or that we should be slow in de-

fining our ideals. The danger is that we may orient our purposes by our temporary enmity with Germany, rather than by our needs—so that Germany rather than our actual situation will direct our efforts. Is it not true that we are beginning to define a patriotic school as one in which the German language is not studied? Are we not beginning to define a good opera season as one in which no modern German opera is produced? How long will it be before we are convinced that a good book is any book not written by a German? There is danger, I say, that we may turn these stupid emotions of the present crisis into articulate and fixed purposes. I for one refuse to accept them as my ideals. Our quarrel with the Germans is deep, and the grounds of it can be stated, but with German music or with the German language we have no quarrel. If there is to be a generation of Americans who neither read nor speak German, and if there is to be, as many fear, an era of suspicion after the war, it is not likely that the Germans will imitate our stupidity and neglect the study of English; they will understand what we are thinking and saying, and we shall keep ourselves in even greater ignorance than we have hitherto been of their interests and aspirations.

If, however, we state our ideals in terms of genuine spiritual needs, as we now understand them, we may define the profound difference between the Germans and ourselves without throwing away the advantages of our position. From the utterances of modern German philosophers, and from the behavior of Germany in the war, we understand that the German ideal is to be natural, in a Darwinian sense. Nature is the scene of warfare and struggle, in which the fittest survive. Nature is also the impulse to survive, and the energy which sustains us in the struggle. This is the prospect which man sees when he looks upon the life of other animals; it should become, Germany thinks, the pattern of man's own conduct. To survive is to be the fittest; the means to survive, different in different animals, is whatever nature provides. With such a philosophy, the worst brutalities of war, the most cynical betrayal of faith, become excusable because they are natural. It is natural for an animal in hunger to be ruthless at the sight of food—the ruthlessness is unmoral, merely an indication of hunger; it is natural for the fortunate animals to push the less fitted to the wall—the impulse by itself indicates a masterly spirit, likely to survive. This is what we see in nature, I repeat, and man may, if he choose, decide that it is best to go with his

native impulses, to be what his innate propensities would suggest, to do what he would have done had he never become civilized—but to do it with more efficiency.

Over against this philosophy we set an ideal of liberty—a kind of liberty which we might not have defined for ourselves had not the war compelled us. Granting that nature is cruel, rapacious and vindictive, we believe that man becomes free only when he liberates himself from these natural tendencies—only when by virtue of his reason and his will he rises into control of nature, directing its tragic caprice to happy uses. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and the leaf blows with the wind, but the sailor is free to sail where he also listeth. If to continue alive be the only ambition for the soul, then the means to life must be had at all costs, even at the cost of other lives; but reason may decide that rather than pay an inhuman price, it is better not to save ourselves—better to die than to make hunger an excuse for cruelty, better not to succeed than by success to become ignoble. Reason may teach us an ideal of freedom in which the best parts of our old ideals will be summed up and restated—freedom for each man to be human, without the strains of poverty or persecution, and without the more insidious constraint of an inadequate philosophy. When our German friends defend the sinking of the “Lusitania,” on the ground that war is war, and that a nation which still allows negroes to be lynched is in no position to say what is civilized and what is not, we refuse to debate with Germany on such grounds, not because her argument is strong, but because we will not concede the premises of her philosophy. The Germans sank the “Lusitania”; let it be said that we have allowed negroes to be burned at the stake. The profound difference between us and Germany is that we wish to live in a civilization where such actions are considered crimes.

In one obvious sense the German ideal is dangerous for us; the German has put it into execution, and the logic of it impels him to annihilate us if he can. In more subtle ways also the doctrine that man should be natural is laying siege to our national character, though seldom under a German name—I refer again to those educational theories, and, alas! to those educational practices, which would train—or permit—the young to develop their instincts and impulses, rather than free them from the tyranny of those impulses. But dangerous as this surrender to nature is, it is not so dangerous just now, I firmly believe, as the doctrine of irresponsibility,

of anarchy, which spreads fast among us. No ideal is genuine unless the will is enlisted to make it real; and liberty of any kind is but an empty word unless those who shout it and call for it will undertake the responsibility of getting and keeping it. If we are to remain free, we must obviously assume our share in the drudgery of freedom, we must exercise courteous forbearance toward the idiosyncracies of others, and we must keep our promises, even though it be to our own hurt. In the maintenance of intellectual liberty, a liberty maintained by discussion, we must tell the whole truth; it is only the whole truth that will make us free. Clearly we are not in the mood nowadays to assume this particular responsibility. We dislike to tell the whole truth about Germany, because if we did, we should have to mention some admirable qualities, and we wish not to admire the enemy. Similarly we dislike to tell the whole truth of our opponents in political campaigns. We do not concede the numerous successes of the administration which we wish to supplant; if we did, there would be nothing left but to point out, as a lame conclusion, the respects in which we think we could do better. It seems more dramatic to charge the other party with complete failure, and to add broad hints, or even plain charges, that our opponents are crooks. In our academic world, where freedom is essential to the advance of knowledge, we scholars are not always scrupulous to tell the whole truth about those with whom we differ. If we are persuaded that school boards or college trustees fail in this point or that to give scholarship a proper encouragement, we think we strengthen our case if we suppress the fact that school boards and trustees are not complete failures, but have actually rendered valuable service to education. It seems prudent to many of us, moreover, to suppress the fact that not all teachers take their profession nobly or even seriously. By telling only part of the truth, we do succeed in arousing public clamor, but we conceal the points at which intelligent progress toward intellectual freedom might be made.

The advantages involved in this ideal of liberty are so obvious, that we may well pause to ask why men are not careful to tell the whole truth, are not careful to exercise the utmost self-restraint, in order that at least the liberty we have achieved may be handed down to our children. It is this disposition toward anarchy, a more dangerous enemy, as I said, than the German philosophy, which leads us not to preserve our ideals,

but to loot them. Is there some liberty already achieved? Then let us seize all we can of it, let us exercise it without responsibility, let us exhaust it as a selfish tenant might exhaust another man's land; and let the other man restore his inheritance as he may. If ideals are attained in this world by self-discipline and by co-operation, there is always a temptation for the mean man to seize more than his share, without co-operation at all; if only he is the first to do this, he is fairly sure that his more conscientious fellows will for a while at least try to make good his theft by taking extra responsibilities upon themselves. But when too many citizens become anarchists, there are not enough of the conscientious to maintain an ideal for the selfish to loot.

If the ideal of natural force is connected today with the practices of Germany, this ideal of anarchy, of freedom without responsibility, has in the past months been connected, at least in popular thought, with the events in Russia. When we know clearly what is going on in Russia, we shall probably find that other issues are involved than the ideal of anarchy. But for years the doctrine of philosophic anarchism has quite naturally prospered in Russia, and has been imported into the United States. Anarchy as an ideal takes root in countries which have a strong government—whether autocratic or democratic. You can neglect your responsibilities only when some one else does the work for you. Of course, if your government shoots and hangs the anarchist, he can hardly be said to loot his ideal; but if it deals with him in a less severe way than by killing him, his philosophy compels the government to make some provision for his existence, since he makes none for himself. Should the government collapse, however, it is no more possible to continue to be an anarchist than it would be for Robinson Crusoe on his lonely isle. I know the anarchist agrees that when government comes to an end, anarchy, the negation of government, must also end; but you must first be an anarchist before you are willing to describe life in terms of government and governed, rather than in terms of ideals and responsibilities. The fact remains that in a state where no one else assumes your responsibilities for you, as on Crusoe's isle, you either assume them yourself or you die. You are back in that state of immediate struggle which the German apologists have glorified today.

If this will to be irresponsible arose in Russia, it has found a kindred ideal to blend with in that American per-

suation I spoke of, that life here is and should be an Eldorado, an acquisition of unearned wealth and happiness. We are individualists, we say; but we must in frankness describe ourselves most precisely. The Renaissance man was an individualist. He desired to develop to the utmost every talent he had, for the sake of a large career and a lasting fame. We do not particularly wish to develop our talents nor the resources of our country; such a wish involves patience, determination, drudgery. What we wish is to avoid responsibility. So strong is our selfishness, that even those political philosophies which rest entirely on the ideal of life in common, soon disintegrate when imported to our soil. The socialists in America today are rapidly becoming anarchists. The ideal of a state responsibility for the individual they still cling to, as all anarchists do; but they say nothing of the individual's responsibility for the state. In the present war they have criticized the government, and they have imputed evil motives to those who see an essential difference between the German ideal and ours; but so far as I know they have at no time said or done anything which would increase the individual's sense of responsibility toward society in this time of need. It is the non-socialist today who is doing the social things—conserving the food supply, regulating prices in the interest of the state, organizing the relief of the destitute, bringing medical science to bear not only upon the care of wounded soldiers, but upon the improvement of the common health now and after the war. The professional socialist profits from our carrying out of what were once his professed ideals, but he is not helping to carry them out—or if he does help, he is so out of tune with his organized party that he resigns, or is summarily dismissed from it. In the confusion of our emotions we say that the socialist is spreading a German influence among us; but to say this is to fail to discriminate among our perils. Whatever else Germany is, it is a social state, and though it might be willing for war purposes to see anarchy spread in Russia and in the United States, it knows the danger of anarchy, and is as far as possible from entertaining it as an ideal. But in our democracy, among a growing number of us, the enjoyment of liberty without responsibility is an ideal, and one illustration of its influence is this tendency of the socialist party to evade common responsibility.

But without responsibility, can we have an ideal? In our definition of an ideal, a genuine purpose implies the will to

realize that purpose. We shall always be individualists, let us hope; we shall always be ready to stand for the ideal which to the best of our knowledge is the proper answer to our needs—we shall be true to our ideal even if public opinion disagrees with us. It is only in the brutal state of nature that all animals of the same kind conform approximately to one program of conduct; when the mind is free, there will be differences of opinion and increasing differences of character; and there will be occasional martyrs. Unfortunately, there are no martyrs in our democracy. Martyrdom is an art for which we have no longer the gift. We are willing to preach doctrines that get us into trouble, but we are not willing to abide by the consequences or to sustain the responsibilities of our preaching. Last year two boys connected with my own university were arrested for attempting to print a pamphlet which advised opposition to the draft law. Under the advice of counsel supposed to be mature, and no doubt in conformity with their own impulses, they pleaded that they were indeed responsible for the pamphlet, but if they had not been arrested for another twenty-four hours, they would have changed it so as not to have committed a seditious act. They were, of course, convicted. A graduate of the university said to me shortly afterward that these young men were a disgrace to us. I agreed with him, but said that my reason for thinking them a disgrace to the university was probably not the same as his. If they had been genuinely opposed to the draft law, and had felt compelled to preach against it, and had maintained their position before the court, I should still have thought them in the wrong, and I should have felt that any self-respecting government must punish them, but I should not have thought their conduct disgraceful. If they came into my course in literature, would I not be holding up for their admiration a Milton or a Thoreau, or some other honored spirit who, standing out against the majority, was perhaps in error, but who was staunch to an ideal? To waste the time of the community, however, by preaching a revolt which you are not willing to suffer for, is to behave no more nobly than the naughty boys on the street corner who try to annoy the policeman without getting caught. These young men behaved disgracefully, since they failed to take the responsibility of their ideals. I go further; I say that they and whoever advised them—and, alas! too many citizens in our country—do not appear to know what an ideal is for.

IV

In an hour of conflicting ideals, can one be neutral? We teachers are said to be more reluctant than other men to take sides in the present war. We are, it may be, so shocked at what seems to us the failure of the intellectuals in Germany to take a scientific attitude toward this cataclysm, that we hesitate to resemble them even to the extent of avowing loyalty to our own country. A fair mind ought to understand this hesitation, since it is impossible that any country should be entirely right in all its actions; yet a fair mind ought to understand also how speedily a neutral attitude will bring the suspicion of disloyalty. If ideals grow out of actual needs, every ideal grows out of the needs of a particular place at a particular moment, and loyalty to that ideal carries with it a vital interest in that place and that moment. The passion for the very soil ought to accompany idealism. We need not be surprised if earnest men look askance at the so-called internationalism which attaches its ideals indiscriminately to all places alike, or to no place in particular. They feel rightly that to be neutral in such a fashion is to be in an aggressive sense unfriendly to the ideals of the community in which we live.

Of course, the teachers who have tried to be neutral in this war can give reasons for their attitude. Some of us are persuaded that civilization will be in the hands of the country which wins the war, and we cannot now tell positively which side is going to win, nor what new ideals the conditions after the war will bring forth. To take this attitude, however, is to evade the responsibility for the ideals we now hold; it is to lay upon someone else the burden of making a choice. To those who are neutral till they see who can win, we might recommend the example of the Children in the Fiery Furnace, who thought their god could save them, but whether he could or not, they had no doubt as to which was their god. It is not essential for a man or a nation to win; it is essential to go with one's own kind, and to put one's ideals to the test.

Another group of teachers hesitate to state their ideals just now, because of the educational theory already twice referred to. Education, they think, should draw out the student's personality; the teacher should stand by as a kind of umpire or encourager, but always with his own ideals in abeyance. The difficulty with this theory is that the children will teach each other, and children are never neutral in their ideals. If the

teacher tries to withhold a directing influence, the ablest students will direct the thinking of the others—often toward conclusions which a more mature mind will not approve.

Another group of teachers hesitate to speak of their ideals in this present war for a reason with which we all sympathize. They are beyond the fighting age themselves, they say, or, being women, they would not be called on to risk their lives; how, therefore, can they hold before their students an ideal which would lead some of those students to an early grave? The question is one to make us pause. But have we never before devoted our students to an ideal—even to an ideal which might end in danger?

A few evenings ago a distinguished surgeon of the British army was telling us of a young Scotch doctor who was severely wounded in the beginning of the war. Knowing that there was no other doctor in that part of the line, he refused to be taken to the rear for the attention which would have saved his life, but lay in the muddy trench caring for the stream of wounded brought to him, until he fainted and was carried off to die. When he decided to give his life for the soldiers he could help, we do not know what his opinion was of the survival of the fittest or of one's right to a place in the sun. But we do know that he had an ideal and sustained it; and if it had been our teaching which devoted him to that ideal, we should have no regrets—except to wish that we, too, might have sustained our ideals so well.



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